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Nicaragua Accuses Red Cross Official of Spying for U.S. Military

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, Nov. 20—The revolutionary government has arrested a Nicaraguan Red Cross official on charges he carried out spying missions to gather sensitive military intelligence for American military officers attached to the U.S. Embassy here.

The case, partially reported by the government-guided press, has helped confirm for the Sandinista government and the general public widely held suspicions that what they call "la CIA" (pronounced see-ah) is actively working to undermine this country's three-year-old revolution.

If accusations contained in the indictment against the official and statements in a confession videotaped after his arrest in July are true, they also provide an unusual glimpse of methods used for collecting on-the-ground intelligence despite diplomatic travel restrictions, and spotlight the U.S. military's continued desire for such first-hand observation even in an era of spy satellites and high-flying reconnaissance planes.

The alleged spy, Nicaraguan Red Cross operations chief Jose René Talavera, has said his confession was obtained under duress.

The United States, while maintaining that information gathering is a normal part of a diplomat's work, has said that all American personnel attached to its embassy here function within internationally accepted norms.

But Washington has not yet replied directly to an official note, dated Sept. 9, from the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry alleging CIA links to a series of terrorist acts and sabotage here and complaining specifically about the Talavera case. The note, handed to the U.S. Embassy, "strongly condemns and protests" what it called "this espionage work" and demands "sufficient clarification."

The Foreign Ministry also provided the embassy with the videotape of the alleged spy's confession, which it described as "grave accusations that affect the diplomatic functionaries referred to."

According to an indictment handed down Nov. 5 in Judge Yolanda Huémbes Ramírez's Managua district criminal court, Talavera carried out intelligence-gathering assignments in Nicaragua's militarily important Atlantic Coast region from the beginning of 1980 until March of this year.

Talavera, 40, traveled to the troubled region as part of his job to inspect projects for Miskito Indians, the indictment said. But he also reported back, at first to Col. Allan Charles Cornell, then to Maj. Arturo Barrera, U.S. military officers assigned to the Military Liaison Office in the U.S. Embassy here, it added.

His assignments included gathering intelligence on deployment of Nicaragua's Soviet-designed T55 tanks, numbers of troops and patrol boats at Puerto Cabezas, improvement of a landing strip just north of the sleepy

little port, suspected stationing of Soviet-made Mig fighter-bombers at Puerto Cabezas and a suspected Soviet offshore submarine tending base near Corn Island in the Atlantic, the indictment said.

Talavera reported finding no Migs at the airstrip, the indictment said. It added that, after assigning a fishing boat captain to have a look near Corn Island and Grand Cayman Island, Talavera also reported back to his American contacts in Managua that no Soviet submarine-tending facilities were to be seen.

Talavera also was asked to find out whether Soviet or Cuban doctors took part in the forced transport last December of

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